

Tropical Cyclone 21-78, the 4th cyclone of the year in the north Indian Ocean, presented forecast problems for JTWC. More importantly, however, the small country of Sri Lanka suffered one of the worst disasters in its history.

Forecasting problems were related, primarily, to the paucity of data in the Indian Ocean. Reconnaissance aircraft are not routinely tasked on missions in the Bay of Bengal. Radar data is practically unheard of, and conventional data, especially from ships and aircraft transitting the Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal, are minimal to non-existent. Therefore, almost total reliance on satellite data is the rule. Real-time satellite imagery of this area is not available at JTWC. Data is received at AFGWC, analyzed and reports are sent some three to five hours after data time. Analysis of TIROS-N, APT satellite data from the USS LaSalle was used to supplement fix data.

On the 19th of November, an area of convective activity about 300 nm (556 km) northwest of Sumatra began to show increased organization, and a Tropical Cyclone Formation Alert was issued at 0705Z on the 20th of November. 200542Z satellite data, received from AFGWC just after the formation alert was issued, showed that a 15 nm (28 km) eye had formed and the tropical disturbance was immediately upgraded to Tropical Cyclone 21-78 with maximum winds of 40 kt (21 m/sec). The presence of an eye is often indicative of typhoon intensity; however, because TC 21-78 appeared quite compact and also because satellite intensity analysis techniques are not specifically designed for application to Indian Ocean cyclones, a more conservative 40 kt (21 m/sec) was deemed more representative of the cyclone's true surface intensity.

Even though synoptic data were generally quite sparse, sufficient upper-air reports were available to indicate that a well-defined mid-tropospheric high pressure cell was situated over central India, with strong ridging extending eastward over the Bay of Bengal to Southeast Asia. 500 mb winds over the east Indian coast were from the northeast at 25 to 30 kt (13 to 15 m/sec) at that time. Initial forecasts showed TC 21-78 tracking slightly north of west, then west. It was reasoned that the west-northwest track would be forced more westward as the cyclone came under the influence of mid-level northeasterly steering flow nearer the Indian coast.

The mid-level northeasterlies apparently extended considerably further into the Bay of Bengal than analyzed, because TC 21-78 actually moved west-southwest at 5 to 7 kt (9 to 13 km/hr) for the next 48 hours (Fig. 3-34), continued to intensify slowly and reached typhoon intensity by 220800Z November.

During the subsequent 48-hour period, the high pressure cell over central India

migrated eastward into the Bay of Bengal to a position north of the cyclone. Northerly 500 mb winds reported by stations along the

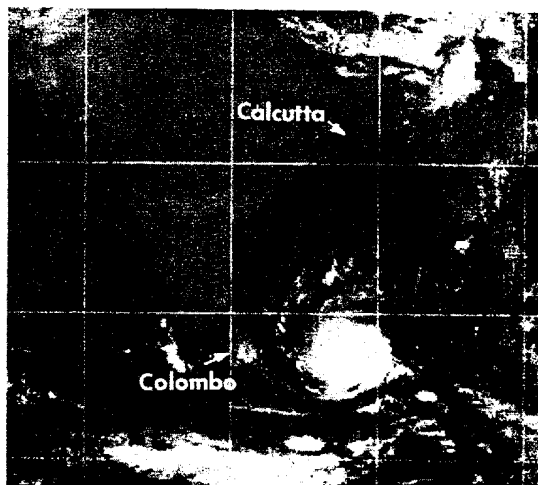


FIGURE 3-34. Infrared image of TC 21-78 at 50 kt (26 m/sec) intensity moving slowly toward Sri-Lanka, 21 November 1978, 0542Z. (DMSP imagery from AFGWC; Offutt AFB, Nebraska as received by FWF Suitland, Maryland)

west coast of India were the first clue that still another high pressure cell had developed over the Arabian Sea. TC 21-78 reached the southernmost point of its track at 220800Z and thereafter began to move to the west-northwest toward a weakness between the Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal highs.

The system continued to intensify and made landfall on the east coast of Sri Lanka, near Batticaloa, with maximum sustained winds of 95 kt (49 m/sec), at 231400Z. At 231200Z, Batticaloa had reported a surface wind of 85 kt (44 M/sec) from the north. TC 21-78 crossed Sri Lanka in slightly over 12 hours and exited into the Gulf of Mannar (near the city of Mannar) on Sri Lanka's west coast (Fig. 3-35).

With max winds reduced to 45 kt (23 m/sec) due to the terrain effects of Sri Lanka, the cyclone then struck the southern coast of India north of Tuticorin weakening still further to 30 kt (15 m/sec), before it moved into the Arabian Sea north of Cochin.

From 240000Z to 280000Z a basic north-westward track was evident. The key to understanding this movement can be found by examining the 500 mb analyses during that period. The high pressure cell that was over the Arabian Sea moved eastward into central India, then shifted east-southeastward into the Bay of Bengal. 500 mb reports from Sri Lanka and southern India at 251200Z showed 20 to 25 kt (10 to 13 m/sec) winds from the southeast, which supported the cyclone's northwest movement.

TC 21-78 did not reintensify significantly after its passage across Sri Lanka and India. (It was expected to reintensify once it was again over warm water, but re-intensification was slight and the system never again developed above tropical storm strength.) By 270600Z the cyclone's upper level center began to shear off from its surface center and satellite data revealed only low-level cloudiness signifying a low-level circulation. Warnings continued on the cyclone until 290800Z because it was felt that regeneration was still possible. By the 29th, satellite data indicated that TC 21-78 had weakened to the point that it was no longer a significant tropical circulation.

TC 21-78 was one of the most destructive storms of the year in either the Indian Ocean or West Pacific. Approximately one thousand people were killed and thousands of acres of crops were destroyed in Sri Lanka by the cyclone's winds, rain, and associated storm surge. In southern India only 10 people were killed; however, eighteen to twenty-five foot waves produced by the storm surge submerged 45 villages. Luckily, because of ample advance warning, the inhabitants were evacuated in time.

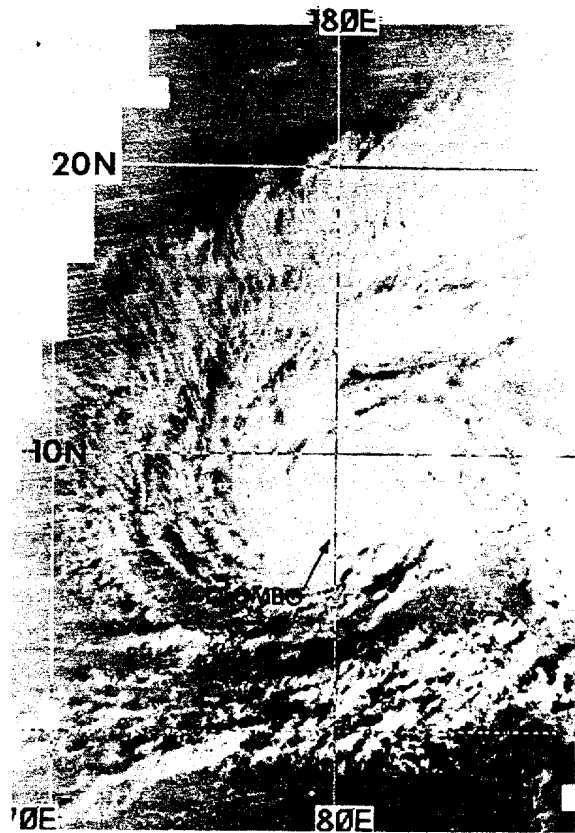


FIGURE 3-35. TC 21-78 located over north-central Sri-Lanka, 24 November 1978, 0118Z. (DMSP imagery from AFGWC, Offutt AFB, Nebraska)